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ABSTRACT

Statistics indicating that the problem of illiteracy is lessening mask a greater problem--that of functional illiteracy. Functional illiterates may have some reading and writing skills but are not able to apply them as functioning members of society. A 1975 study using the most sophisticated instrument that had ever been used to determine illiteracy in the United States adult population indicated that 16% of white, 44% of black, and 56% of Spanish-speaking adults in the United States were unable to write a check, address an envelope, or calculate the amount of change they should receive from a purchase with a 20-dollar bill. Parents and students blame the educational system for this failure while educators blame the students themselves. Researchers contend that children are watching too much television and not reading enough. The cost of functional illiteracy to the national economy in decreased productivity and in social welfare expenses is estimated at six billion dollars a year, but it is difficult to determine how many aspects of economic life are linked, directly or indirectly, to functional illiteracy. A number of federal and state funded programs such as Title I and Right to Read have been initiated along with basic adult education and literacy training by employers. In addition, private organizations are working to stem the tide of functional illiteracy in the United States. (HTH)

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FUNCTIONAL ILLITERACY

FREEDOM OF INFORMATION CENTER REPORT NO. 466

This report was written by Sheryl Hovey, an M.A. graduate of the University of Missouri School of Journalism.

> May 22, 1977
> lerning to read. is to not haveing to con your way trou life. it is not being on gard all of the time. it is not puting other peple dome all of the time. it is lerning to love peple insted of heating peple. that peple can except you for your slef. lerning to read is a kiy to opening door. for me[1]

The above letter was not written by an 8-year-old, but by a 28-year-old man in Vermont who was learning literacy skills with the help of a volunteer tutor.

This man's illiteracy is not an isolated case. According to the U.S. Bureau of the Census, of 143,137,000 people living in the U.S. in 1969, aged 14 or older, 1,433,000, or 1 percent, were illiterate.[2] Projections by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) put the percentage of the 1980 U.S. adult population who are 15 and older and illiterate at .5 percent.[3] So it would appear that the situation is improving. But these figures mask a greater problem — functional illiteracy. Functional illiterates may have some reading and writing skills, but are not able to apply them to be functioning members of society.

The number of functional illiterates in the U.S. cannot be determined exactly because of a lack of validated tests. One estimate puts the number in the ballpark range of from 20 percent of the U.S. adult population, or 32.5 million, to perhaps 39 million persons age 14 or older.[4]

In 1975, Dr. Norcell Northcutt directed the Adult Performance Level study using a more sophisticated instrument than had ever been used to determine illiteracy in the adult U.S. population. Northcutt used a set of 65 objectives — areas of competence which were associated with his definition of adult success. Study results showed that 16 percent of whites, 44 percent of blacks and 56 percent of Spanish-speaking adults in the U.S. were what he termed functionally incompetent.[5]

> Fourteen percent, when asked to fill out a check in a business transaction, made an error so serious that it was unlikely that the check would clear the bank. Thirteen percent did not address an envelope well enough to guarantee that it would reach its destination. Twenty-four percent did not place a return address on the same envelope. Twenty-eight percent of the sample population could not calculate the amount of change that they ought to get back after paying for a purchase with a $20 bill.[6]

After studying the results of the Adult Performance Level report, an Office of Education analyst concluded that 57 million Americans were unequipped to carry out most basic tasks. The figure is more than 35 percent of the entire adult population in the United States.[7]

Functional illiterates are often unemployed, living in poverty and alienated from the rest of society. Some surveys indicate that more than one-half of all welfare recipients are functionally illiterate, reading at grade school levels. The functionally illiterate person earns an average of $4,000 a year less than the literate person (New York Times, 4 March 1981).

The situation is underscored by the fact that the gap between the functionally illiterate and others is growing larger in today's paper-oriented society. White-collar workers in the U.S. increased from 36 percent of the work force in 1947 to more than 50 percent in 1981.[8]

At the same time, reading demands on the job increased. A 1975 study indicated that it takes approximately a seventh-grade reading level to hold a job as a cook, an eighth-grade level to hold a job as a mechanic and a ninth- or tenth-grade reading level to hold a job as a supply clerk.[9]

Technology has done everything but simplify life; the world has grown increasingly complex. Ernest Boyer, Commissioner of Education, cited a study by Prof. Ted R. Kilty which analyzed the materials an average person has to read. It indicated that a sixth-grade reading level is required to understand a driver's license manual. An eighth-grade level is needed to follow the instructions on a frozen TV dinner. Aspirin bottle instructions are written at a tenth-grade reading level. A twelfth-grade reading ability is needed to understand an insurance policy and a college-lev-

Summary

Access to information begins with the ability to read. Many adults in the U.S. lack basic reading and writing skills. This report discusses the magnitude of functional illiteracy today.

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el reading ability is required to figure out the provisions of an apartment lease.

In today's advanced technological society, why are children and adults failing in basic reading tasks and who is to blame?

Parents and students tend to blame the country's educational system while principals, teachers and boards of education point an accusing finger at the students themselves. Researchers of the phenomenon say that many children today lack basic reading skills because they spend more hours watching figures on the television screen than reading. This situation is compounded by the fact that in some areas of the country teachers and principals also read and write inadequately. Both the federal government and state governments are initiating stricter proficiency standards and compensatory requirements for high school students. A number of federal and state funded programs such as Title One and Right to Read have been initiated along with basic adult education and literacy training by employers. In addition, a number of private organizations such as Literacy Volunteers of America, Inc., and Laubach Literacy are working to stem the tide of functional illiteracy in the United States.

DEFINING FUNCTIONAL ILLITERACY

What is functional illiteracy? The variety of definitions is astounding. At the beginning of the recent surge of anti-poverty programs in 1964, the functional illiterate was defined as the person with less than five years of schooling.[11] Many programs were started to raise the reading of functional illiterates to the fifth-grade level. The assumption that the two phrases, five years of schooling and fifth-grade reading level, are the same thing was dispelled in 1969. Using the Armed Forces Qualification Test, an achievement and intelligence test used by the military, the federal government found that people often read from three to four grade levels below the number of years of schooling they have received.[12] Later studies in Cook County, Ill., and East St. Louis, Ill., confirmed the Army's findings.

The fifth-grade reading level as measured by most standardized tests developed for children or adults was found to be inadequate for accomplishing the functions of an independent adult.[13] The definition was changed to eight years of schooling, then to functioning at the eighth-grade level on a standardized test. Mathematical ability was also included.

In April 1970 — with the amendment of the Adult Education Act of 1966 as part of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act so that funds allocated for adult basic education could be used to help people complete high school — the definition of functional illiteracy was amended to include anyone who had not completed high school. David Harman, a professor at Hebrew University in Israel, stated in a Harvard University study in 1970 that functional illiteracy should not be made on the basis of grades completed. Instead, he felt that a definition of functional literacy should encompass the following three stages.

> The first is the conceptualization of literacy as a tool. The second is literacy attainment, the learning of reading and writing skills. The third is the practical application of these skills in activities meaningful to the learner. Each stage is contingent upon the former; each is a necessary component of literacy.[14]

In 1971 Louis Harris and Associates studied literacy levels of Americans for the National Reading Center. They defined literacy as the probability of an individual's survival in society. They found that 13 percent of the population age 15 and older, 18.5 million people, were at the marginal survival level. Three percent, or 4.3 million people, were at the low survival level. The study required that people complete tasks such as following directions for direct distance dialing or reading newspaper ads for jobs or housing. A person was rated as marginal if he or she missed 10 percent of the questions; a person who missed more than 30 percent was deemed in the low survival category.[15]

THE COSTS OF FUNCTIONAL ILLITERACY

The costs to the U.S. economy of functional illiteracy are difficult to determine. No one knows exactly how many aspects of economic life can be linked, either directly or indirectly, to functional illiteracy. The national costs in decreased productivity and social welfare expenses are estimated to be $6 billion a year (New York Times, 5 March 1979). In 1970, $2.96 billion of a total $5.9 billion spent on food stamps, welfare checks, visits to the doctor and the dentist, immunization shots, corrective lenses, and lunches and breakfasts at school was directly connected to the under-education of welfare recipients.[16]

In 1970, illiteracy cost $2 billion of $8 billion spent on the criminal system.[17] Today, the yearly cost to keep illiterate prisoners in jails is almost $7 billion.[18]

In addition, no one knows how much money is lost when functional illiterates accidently destroy sophisticated technological equipment because they didn't understand instructions on its use. An example of this was given by Sen. George McGovern, in a speech he delivered to the U.S. Senate on Sept. 8, 1978.

> An astounding 30 percent of Navy recruits . . . are a danger to themselves and to costly naval equipment because they lack basic educational skills. One illiterate recruit recently caused $250,000 in damage because he could not read a repair manual; he tried and failed to follow the illustrations.[19]

Other costs arise when high school graduates "refuse to forget what they did not learn in school," McGovern said.

> Recently a high school student of normal intelligence sued his school in San Francisco for educational malpractice — he had been awarded a diploma even though he could read only at a fifth-grade level. Legal counsels of various state offices of education agree that the number of such suits will increase, and that increasingly they will succeed.[20]

The federal government has borne a large portion of the costs of functional illiteracy through its programs for children and adults.

Federal aid to fight functional illiteracy at the grade school and high school levels has come in the form of Title One of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965.[21] The program was initiated to improve the education of low-income, low-achieving children. But, as the years go by and functional illiteracy increases, the funds allocated to Title One decrease.

In 1967, the Title One program served 7.6 million children. Each received an average of $378. Just 10 years later, only 5.2 million children received assistance at the same level, a 32 percent decrease in spending.[22]

Title One may actually hinder more children than it helps. Title One students receive less time in reading and basic skills than non-Title One students. Fewer than 1 percent of American high school students benefit from Title One although it was structured to help both elementary and secondary schools. Therefore, a child who makes progress in grade school forfeits those gains in high school. The National Institute of Education in 1978 said "The schools are failing to provide the help necessary to decrease the number of functionally illiterate students between the ages of 12 and 17."[23]

The federal government's first endeavor to allocate money for fighting adult functional illiteracy came in the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964 and the Adult Education Act of 1966. The impact of both pieces of federal legislation is minimal. When broken down, the 1979 funding amounted to only $1 for each illiterate adult. The funds are available to only 2 to 4 percent of the illiterate adults in this country.[24]

In 1972, according to George McGovern, Congress reaffirmed its commitment to end illiteracy with the Right to Read program. That program was downgraded in 1978 after being labeled a failure by its own director.[25]

The Right to Read program and its predecessor, Adult Basic Education, did achieve success with those adult illiterates that they reached. But approximately 96 to 98 percent of adult illiterates did not receive aid.

America must also pay more at the end for paying less at the beginning, according to McGovern. The 1978 bill for federal aid to education authorized only $47 million for basic skills training.[26] McGovern said it would be more economically feasible to prevent higher social costs in the years ahead by spending more money now on basic education.

The situation was no better in 1981. The Department of Education's Basic Skills improvement program was still helping older youths and adults with their reading problems, but only $6.6 million of the program's $31.5 million budget that year was earmarked for that purpose.[27]

The Reagan administration cut Basic Skills 10 percent in fiscal 1981. The program is being phased out, its services being continued through block grants to the states. In the future, it will be impossible to tell how much of the funds the states receive from the federal government will be used on reading programs because Basic Skills will be combined with 32 other educational programs in a $589 million block grant.[28]

Also hit by the Reagan administration's budget cuts was the Department of Education's Adult Education program. Federal funding was cut from $120 million to $100 million and is expected to stay at that level through fiscal year 1982.[29]

WHO ARE THE FUNCTIONAL ILLITERATES?

Functional illiterates are often described as illiterate, functionally illiterate, educationally disadvantaged or undereducated. But rarely do they use those terms to describe themselves. Instead they feel powerless and at a disadvantage because they are not able to derive certain benefits from the society.

Adult illiterates' feelings of inadequacy are often reinforced because many people believe they are just dumb. This feeling invades relationships once it is learned that a person is illiterate. It is one of the reasons why functional illiterates are reluctant to let others know they can't read.

A radio interview at station WIRD in Syracuse, N.Y., with a person being tutored in the Lauback Literacy program, revealed an illiterate's reaction to the dummy image.

> INTERVIEWER: Mr. X, why do you want to remain anonymous?
>
> MR. X: Well, right off the bat, if somebody can't read, people instamatically figure that he's stupid, or that he's dumb or that there's something wrong with him mentally. And the major reason why I don't want to be called by my regular name is, I guess you'd call it, fear. Not being able to read is 20th century leprosy, is what it is, because people treat you different. Like if my boss would find out, I'd lose a lot of credit in his eyes. I've told friends. After I tell my friends, the next thing I know, they go out of their way to explain things to me, they start pointing this out to me that they didn't use to point out to me. Maybe you won't understand that. Let me explain it to you. Before you know it, you're being treated as a kid, as half what you used to be treated. That's the major reason why I'm staying as Mr. X.[30]

Functional illiterates can be defined further by looking at related factors such as poverty, unemployment and welfare; race, ethnicity, sex, and age; and place of residence.

Functional illiterates are found in large numbers among the poor; they are found in racial and ethnic minority groups. They are also found in urban areas and on unmechanized farms. The greatest numbers and percentages of them are found in the South and the East. In nine southern states, more than 50 percent of the adults have not completed high school.[31]

Among adults 25 and older who have not completed grade school, regional differences are great. In the South, more than 20 percent of the adults have not completed the eighth grade, and 42 percent of the adults who did not complete high school have fewer than eight years of schooling. Twenty-one of the 50 states have a million or more adults who have not completed high school and who are not currently enrolled in school. For the most part, those 21 are the states with the largest populations.[32]

More undereducated adults live in urban than in rural areas — 62 percent to 38 percent, respectively. Some 27 million are in cities, 17 million in "nonmetropolitan areas." More than 15 percent of adults in rural areas have not even completed grade school. For the most part, those who live in the suburbs stay in school longer than those who live either in the inner city or in rural areas. In rural areas, only about 46 percent complete high school, while in suburban areas the percentage is 70; in central cities, it is 61. Of the total suburban population, only about 7 percent have not completed grade school; in rural areas failure to finish school is more than double that percentage.[33]

A ranking of states and the District of Columbia according to percentages of adult population with less than high school completion in 1974 showed Kentucky with the highest per-

centage at 53.3 and Utah with the lowest at 26.2 percent. New York, the country's second most populous state with 12,992,198 adults, ranked 18th with 5,344,393 adults with less than a high school education.[34]

THE POOR

Of the 54.3 million persons 16 and older in 1970 who were not enrolled in school and who had less than a high school education, 75 percent earned less than $5,000 a year. Only 1 percent had incomes of $15,000 or more, compared to approximately 33 percent of all families in the U.S.[35]

Those who have completed high school have incomes about double of those who have not completed grade school, and half again higher than those with eighth-grade education. This situation prevails among all sectors of the population: men and women, white and black, and all age groups.[36] Those whose schooling stopped before the eighth grade have lifetime earnings about one-third of those with graduate study; in 1970, $250,000 contrasted with $800,000, a gap which seems to be widening.[37]

Approximately 22 percent of the families living in the United States and considered to be living below the government-defined poverty level ($4,275 for a nonfarm family of four in 1972) had heads of households who had completed up to seven years of schooling. Only 7 percent of the families living at or below the poverty level had heads of household who had completed nine to 11 years of schooling.[38]

EMPLOYMENT

The more education a person has the more likely he or she is to be a member of the labor force. But while the unemployment figures of adults who have graduated from high school are almost double those who have not, the rates do not correlate directly to years of school completed. While unemployment rates are lowest for college graduates, they are not highest for those with almost no formal schooling. High school drop-outs have the highest unemployment rate.[39]

In March 1975, when the overall unemployment rate was 9.2 percent of the labor force, the unemployment rates of high school drop-outs were considerably higher than for those who had completed a lower grade. The latter, in turn, were also somewhat above the national level in unemployment.[40]

This can be explained by a number of reasons. First, many people with less than an eighth-grade education tend not to be in the labor force at all. Those that are are usually older, more experienced workers whose lack of formal education may be offset by their on-the-job experience. Those without jobs who have completed eighth grade or less tend to remain unemployed for longer periods than do high school drop-outs.[41]

PUBLIC ASSISTANCE

Despite the wide variety of reasons for people going on the welfare rolls — men and women, black and white, and all age groups — the most common denominator is the level of schooling attained. The proportion of people with fewer than six years of school on welfare is more than double that among those with six to eight years and almost four times that among those with nine to 11 years of schooling.[42]

RACIAL AND ETHNIC MINORITIES

The statistics reveal an even closer interrelationship among poverty, education and racial/ethnic origin. At all levels of education, minorities rank lower than majorities. The National Center for Education compiled statistics that showed that 42 percent of all 17-year-old minority students are functionally illiterate.[43]

Across the country, but especially in rural areas, the number of blacks and other minorities among the educationally disadvantaged is disproportionately high, according to a Ford Foundation study by David Harman and Carmen St. John Hunter. Among rural blacks, 45 percent have not completed grade school; for the population as a whole the figure is about 15 percent.

The study found that 20 percent of suburban blacks have not completed high school, while 23 percent of urban blacks have not. This is in comparison with 7 percent of the total adult suburban population and 12 percent of the adult urban population.[44]

The Ford Foundation report indicated that:

- Blacks are not the only disadvantaged racial or ethnic group. Hispanics, especially women, have a lower level of education than whites or blacks.
- The 30 million Americans who constitute 13 percent of the U.S. population for whom English is not their native tongue have special difficulties.
- The 827,000 Native Americans also face special problems. Only 40 percent of adult urban Native Americans, and fewer than 25 percent of those who live in rural areas, have graduated from high school. Their representation in the work force is so low that they generally do not even appear on the charts.
- Mexican Americans leave school at the earliest age. The median number of years of schooling for Mexican Americans living in urban areas is 8.7 years, as compared with 12.4 years for urban whites and 11.7 years for urban blacks. The median level of schooling for rural Mexican Americans is 6.7 years, as compared with 12.2 and 8.4 years of school completed for rural whites and rural blacks, respectively.
- The median family income rose 70 percent since 1960 to $9,600 in 1970. The median income for blacks during that period rose at an even faster rate, from just over $3,000 in 1960 to approximately $6,000 in 1970. The median income for black families, however, fell far short of the median of approximately $10,000 for white families.
- The median level of school completion is also rising. The median level for blacks rose from five years and eight months in 1940 to 11 years in 1975. The gap between the level of completion for blacks and whites has narrowed to one-half a year's schooling — 12.1 for blacks and 12.5 for whites.

The primary subgroups among the three major overlapping groups of the educationally deprived — the poor, racial and ethnic minorities, and those with less than a high school education — are the young, the old, the imprisoned, and women. Statistical information concerning these groups is harder to decipher than data about the population as a whole.

THE OLD AND THE YOUNG

According to the Senate Committee in its 1978 Annual Report on the Status of Elderly Americans, one out of every nine Americans is 65 years of age or older, can expect to live 16 years or more, has a family income of approximately $6,-300, and is more likely to be illiterate than to be a college graduate. (New York Times, 7 May 1978)

Two out of three adults 16 years of age and older with less than a high school education and not enrolled in school are 45 and older; one in four is 65 or older. Seventy-eight percent of those 65 and older with less than a high school education have not completed grade school.[45]

In 1972, young people accounted for nearly half of the unemployed, although they comprised only a quarter of the labor force. The problem is accentuated in black and other minority communities where in many cases over one-half of the young men have no jobs. The rate of unemployment for 20-to-24-year olds is also higher than it was a few years ago.[46]

The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics for 1977 showed unemployment rates even higher; 42.1 percent for white people between the ages of 16 and 19, and 66.3 percent for minorities.[47] New York City had the highest young unemployment rate among 11 major American cities, according to the statistics, which counted everyone of working age, not only those who are looking for jobs.

A high school education does not fully prepare young people for jobs or guarantee them work. One educator advised blacks and other minority youngsters to go to college. If they do not, he said, "they will never — or may never — get a job." He added:

> Trying to encourage minority youngsters to get an education, learn good work habits and seek employment that holds little for the future, while bombarding them every day with television and film images of success, mostly illegal, some legal, without telling them how to become successful is (probably) impossible to do . . .
>
> Soon the suffering youngsters of today will marry and have children who in a few years will inherit the problems of their parents, and the vicious circle will go on; poor education, lack of training, jobless youngsters, continuing welfare drain, chaos.[48]

THE IMPRISONED

Maryland State Penitentiary reported that 70 percent of its inmates were functionally illiterate. The director of the Wisconsin State Prison felt the low rate of sophisticated crimes was due to a lack of education. A large number of murderers were in his prison, but only one embezzler.[49]

Approximately 75 percent of all prisoners have not finished high school, while 38 percent of the total adult population has not completed high school. Thirty-five to 42 percent of prisoners have an eighth-grade education or less. (N.B. These figures are based on the 1970 census on educational levels for prisoners over age 25. Because 26 percent of prisoners are between 20 and 24, and because figures were not available for youthful offenders between 16 and 20, these percentages are not the whole truth).[50]

WHO IS TO BLAME?

> 'It's fashionable to blame Johnny because he can't read or write, but I suspect he does about as well as his father or mother — or perhaps even as well as his teachers,' said Harvey Jacobs, editor of the Indianapolis News. 'Trying to place the blame for our communications problems brings back a little rhyming explanation:
>
> The college professor says:
> Such rawness in a pupil is a shame:
> High school preparation is to blame.
> The high school teacher says:
> Good heavens, what crudity — the boy's a fool!
> The fault of course is in the grammar school.
> The grade school teacher cries:
> From such stupidity may I be spared;
> They send them to me so unprepared.
> The kindergarten teacher says:
> Such lack of training did I never see;
> What kind of women must the mother be?
> But the mother laments:
> Poor helpless child — he is not to blame;
> His father's folks are just the same.'[51]

In the 1950s, Rudolph Flesch pointed an accusing finger at the system of education. In his book, **Why Johnny Can't Read**, he said Johnny's inability to read by the time he enrolled in junior high school was not Johnny's fault. Flesch said Americans schools teach students to memorize words instead of teaching them to read by associating sounds with meanings.

> The teaching of reading — all over the United States, in all the schools, in all the textbooks — is totally wrong and flies in the face of all logic and common sense. Johnny couldn't read until half a year ago for the simple reason that nobody ever showed him how. Johnny's only problem was that he was unfortunately exposed to an ordinary American school.[52]

In his 1981 book, **Why Johnny Still Can't Read**, Flesch referred to the rapid drop in college entrance examination scores in the past 20 years. He blames this on the schools' failure to teach children to read using the "phonics first" method. This method emphasizes the sounds of letters and letter-combinations within words, as opposed to the "Look-and-Say" method.

In a hearing before the Subcommittee on Education, Arts and Humanities of the U.S. Senate Committee on Labor and Human Resources, Paul Copperman pointed to illiteracy as a result of grade inflation, a decline in the number of hours of instruction students were taking and an increasing enrollment in entertainment classes. Copperman pointed to a Massachusetts study which used a decline in SAT scores as an indicator of the problem.[53]

Roger Farr countered that declining SAT scores cannot be used to substantiate increasing illiteracy because the test is used to assess advanced skills of students who want to attend college.[54]

In 1976, a University of Wisconsin professor, R.R. Allen, put the blame on secondary school English teachers who failed to promote basic skills in the English language. He said that English teachers are more interested in teaching

literature than in teaching basic skills. He quoted Stephen Dunning with an additional reason why English teachers have failed to promote basic skills.

> . . . we don't know enough about how to teach literacy. Not most of us classroom teachers. Not many of use in teacher education. Hardly any of us in 'pure English.' So we avoid issues of literacy, so far as we can, employing such circumventions as reading laboratories (where someone else does the work), as writing laboratories (remediation for the basket cases) and such camouflage as 'developmental reading programs' — often language for 'nothing much is going on.'[55]

Peter O'Brien, former president of the principals and supervisors union in New York City said in 1978 that a number of the city's public schools were being run by functional illiterates who "couldn't read, write or speak a minimum standard of English."[56]

To substantiate his charge, O'Brien produced a number of notes teachers had written. In one message the teacher wrote, "Are all your childring receaving practice for MAT (math aptitude test) regarless of math program in which they mygh be involved."[57]

The education committee of the New York State Assembly began hearings in January of 1978 to examine the hiring practices of New York City educators. The committee found evidence of graft, political patronage and illegal hiring practices. But how did they escape the state law which requires that prospective teachers undergo licensing tests and interviews administered by a Board of Examiners which screens applicants, but has no authority to hire them? The Board's chairwoman, Ethel Fitzgerald, produced documents that showed that the screening process had been eroded by the executive director of the school system's division of personnel who controls the hiring.

During a two-year period, the director's office had appointed approximately 4,000 teachers and administrators who either had failed to meet the Board of Examiners' standards or had avoided the licensing process. Although the authorities were notified of the director's unorthodox hiring methods, many unqualified teachers and administrators had already slipped into the city's school system to perpetuate their lack of skills.[58]

A report prepared by the Lifelong Learning Project of the Office of the Assistant Secretary of Education, U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare in 1978, discussed society's role in perpetuating functional illiteracy.

> One of the most pervasive, damaging, and subtle outcomes of policy debate is the tendency, especially in the face of intractable and politically volatile problems, to blame the victim for the difficulties — and to direct energy and money into efforts to help them reform. This kind of public attention, communicated especially through social programs, tends to reinforce the very situation it is trying to correct: it reinforces in these youths the internal sense of worthlessness that results from living in an environment that cannot adequately sustain either body or spirit.[59]

In some cases, the illiterate adult is to blame for not trying to acquire basic skills. Less than 4 percent of those with less than a high school education enroll in an assistance program each year. In a 1978 review of more than 30 studies of participation in adult basic education, researchers categorized the reasons individuals said they did not or could not participate:

- Situations — The life circumstances the individual finds himself or herself in, including job and family responsibilities, financial resources, time, child care needs, transportation problems and the like;
- Institutions — The scheduling, location, structure, fee schedules, course offerings and other circumstances for learning established by the educational institutions;
- Dispositions — Attitudes toward and perceptions of oneself as a learner.[60]

> And there is ample evidence that the so-called disadvantaged, precisely the group policy makers are interested in reaching, are overrepresented among those expressing no interest in education. Taking survey results as face value is quite likely to overestimate the participation that would result from financial grants to learners and to underestimate the amount of effort that would be required to overcome dispositional barriers.[61]

In a paper presented at the National Right to Read Conference in 1978, four "primary parties" were indicated who might be held accountable for student illiteracy. The paper discussed the possibility of lawsuits brought by the student to seek damages for illiteracy.

The paper indicated that individual educators, the school system, the student and the parents could be held accountable for the following:

- Individual school professionals — Job sanctions, including removal from their positions; and the imposition of money damages through a court proceeding.
- The school system as a whole — The district may be 'disapproved' in some form and required to develop remedial plans; state funds may be withheld (or additional state funds provided); specific requirements for remedial or compensatory programs for low-achiever students may be triggered; a higher level of regional or state intervention may occur. The school system may also be requested to pay money damages to 'injured' students. In fact, most of the lawsuits which have sought such damages have joined the school district and its board of education with individual professionals as the defendants.
- The student — The retention in grade for inadequate performance, required compensatory or remedial instruction, evaluation and perhaps classification as handicapped or learning disabled, and ultimately denial of graduation or a regular diploma. Beyond these, if school authorities can justify low performance levels of students by reference to their status or conduct, then students will in effect be held responsible for their own illiteracy. Some commentators, critical of this approach, have referred to it as blaming the victims for having been victimized.
- The parents — If the parents' ongoing conduct were found to be interfering with the education of their child, a court might order the parents to change their behavior. Finally, parents might also be found to have pecuniary responsibility to their

children if the parents' conduct was considered by a court to have contributed to the students' inadequate performance.[62]

WHAT IS BEING DONE?

Help for the adult functional illiterate is available from private and public sources in the form of compensatory education.

Right to Read is a federally funded compensatory program which began in 1971 with a goal to eradicate illiteracy in the U.S. in 10 years. The program was started to serve as a catalyst to stimulate effort in the states through their education agencies and through private sector efforts to improve reading skills "for all people."[63]

But Right to Read's goal to get rid of illiteracy was unrealistic. David Olson of the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education said in 1975 that unfounded expectations are created by the popular myth that literacy is the most significant criterion of the civilized society. He wondered whether Right to Read could ever make adults already by-passed by the school system literate and whether it should even try. He concluded that a program like Right to Read can, at the most, produce limited research, improve reading levels to a modest degree, and stimulate pilot reading programs. That is exactly where Right to Read has made the most impact.[64]

Adult Basic Education (ABE) began in 1964 with the signing of the Economic Opportunity Act. Amendments added through the years have provided programs for teaching English as a second language and for adults in custodial care. More emphasis is now placed on secondary education than in past years.[65]

ABE is for adults 16 years of age and older who have not completed high school and are not in school now, approximately 59 million Americans. Most ABE classes are taught in traditional elementary school teaching styles. The exceptions are numerous, however. Some teachers allow students to learn at their own pace and to come and go as they please.[66]

Commercially prepared texts and workbooks for basic skills and English language skills are used in most classes. Teachers are encouraged to produce materials relevant to the students' lives, but little time is available for such efforts. Several states have been conducting experimental workshops on the use of newspapers as learning tools for basic education.

When students use materials they themselves prepared, their achievement seems to be the highest. Achievement levels are lowest with commercially prepared materials.[67] A high level of student achievement was reported in one center where participants wrote group stories, songs and poems. Sentences were written on the blackboard, typed, illustrated and distributed to other centers in the program.[68]

While ABE seems to offer a viable means of learning basic skills to those it reaches, poor attendance and a high drop-out rate plague the program.

The goal of the 1978 Basic Skills and Educational Quality Act is to teach every child to read and write. The legislation encourages every state to construct a statewide literacy plan for both children and adults. The legislation proposes using television to teach language fundamentals. In 1978, the Library of Congress and the Office of Education co-sponsored a conference on "Television, the Classroom and the Book." Conference speakers emphasized that television should be used to reinforce, not undercut, educational goals.[69]

CBS became involved in the TV-reading concept in 1976 on a pilot basis in three cities. The program was eventually expanded to include 22 affiliates. The program operates on a decentralized basis, with the network office providing scripts and teachers' guides to affiliates for six to eight television specials each year. The participating affiliates establish contact with the schools in their areas and arrange underwriting for the costs of reprinting scripts (in many cities, in the local newspapers).

In early 1979, 80 percent of the teachers, 70 percent of the students and 96 percent of the parents said they were "very interested" in future use of another script.[70]More than eight out of 10 teachers and parents felt it likely that this kind of reading project increases student interest in and enjoyment of reading in general.[71]

Although television is quickly becoming an important tool in teaching basic skills, there is at least one program that still uses books to teach reading. In 1978, the Reading is Fundamental (RIF) program under the U.S. Office of Education distributed 11 million books to 3.85 million children, a 16 percent increase in books distributed in 1977.[72]

RIF is a cooperative effort between private citizens and the federal government. It is a motivational program that makes children want to read by letting them choose from a variety of paperback books. The children are then allowed to keep the books. The pilot program, which started 15 years ago, attracted so much support from foundations, individuals and corporations that the program caught fire around the country.

In 1976, Congress appropriated funds for the Inexpensive Book Distribution Program; and HEW, through the U.S. Office of Education, joined with Reading is Fundamental to administer the program.[73] Congress stipulated that local communities must meet certain criteria to qualify for the program and must raise funds that Congress will match for the purchase of books.

Since Reading is Fundamental was founded, two million children in the inner cities, in the barrios, on Indian reservations, in Appalachia and in poor rural areas have received well over six million paperbacks — the first books most of them ever owned.[74]

During the 1977-1978 school year, more than two-and-one-half million children were choosing and keeping more than 10 million books. The program has succeeded for a great part because of the 80,000 volunteers around the country who have attempted to make Reading is Fundamental work in their communities.[75]

In 1978, the federal government was an avid supporter of programs to reach and teach the functionally illiterate. Federal education programs such as Head Start, Follow Through and Title One had markedly increased their support of basic skills. In 1978, 80 percent of all federal support to elementary and secondary schools was committed to teaching children to read and write.[76] The government expanded the programs under the Adult Education Act by increasing the adult education budget from $80.5 million in 1977 to $90.7 million in 1978.[77]

But in 1981, the tables had turned. The Reagan administration's budget cuts were taking a huge chunk out of most

of these programs; funding for the Adult Education Program was reduced from $120 million to $100 million in 1981.[78]

Earlier in 1981, Congress withdrew $410 million of the $3.5 billion set aside for fiscal year 1981 for Title One of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965. Title One provides support for educationally disadvantaged children primarily at the elementary school level. It has been credited with increases in reading and math scores as reported by the National Assessment of Educational Programs.[79] In the Reagan administration's budget "reconciliation" bill, Title One spending in fiscal 1982 was reduced to $3.48 billion.[80] Local and state tax groups are also cutting budgets for education.

According to Wanda Cook in her book, **Adult Literacy Education in the United States**, attitude is the hidden variable of the illiteracy problem.

> Next, it must be acknowledged that there is a large group of adults who will not be reached. Recognition of this fact provides the second direction. We, as a nation, must commit ourselves to preventative measures and focus our attention on elementary and secondary schools. Only when we concentrate on producing literate students can we hope to affect the statistics.[81]

FOOTNOTES

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